

**THE
KINDNESS OF
STRANGERS**



THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

HOW A SELFISH APE INVENTED
A NEW MORAL CODE

MICHAEL MCCULLOUGH

BASIC BOOKS

New York

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*To Joel William Michael McCullough
and
To Madeleine Elisabeth McCullough
with love.
Where did all the years go?*



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CHAPTER 1

A GOLDEN AGE OF COMPASSION

This book is about one of the great zoological wonders of the world. I'm not talking about the tears of the elephant, the smile of the dolphin, the politics of the chimpanzee, the consciousness of the octopus, the peacock's tail, the kingdom of the ants, or the wisdom of the birds or the bees or the dogs. I'm talking about a scrawny, brainy ape with the habit of helping strangers—often risking time and treasure and occasionally even life and limb to do so. It's about you and me, and how we treat everybody else. It's about the kindness of strangers.

When it comes to compassion for strangers, the human species is in a class of its own. Chimpanzees, like humans, regularly help kith and kin, but the number of chimpanzees who dive into swollen rivers to save drowning strangers, or send food to families of needy chimps in Tanzania, or perform weekend volunteer work at chimpanzee retirement homes, is zero. Year after year after year after year (do this 8 million times), no chimpanzee has ever lifted a finger to help a stranger. No less a naturalist than Charles Darwin saw the gulf between humans' and chimpanzees' capacity for caring as one of the most blindingly obvious behavioral differences between the two species:

There can be no doubt that the difference between the mind of the lowest man and that of the highest animal is immense. Some apes . . . might insist that they were ready to aid their fellow-apes of the same

troop in many ways, to risk their lives for them, and to take charge of their orphans; but they would be forced to acknowledge that disinterested love for all living creatures, the most noble attribute of man, was quite beyond their comprehension.¹

Let's try to comprehend what the chimpanzees cannot. In contrast to our closest primate cousins, more than 150 people in the United States and nearly 100 in Great Britain donate a kidney to a complete stranger each year.² The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem honors more than 27,362 non-Jews who risked their lives and their liberty to rescue Jewish people during the Holocaust.³ The Carnegie Corporation has recognized more than 10,000 ordinary Americans who knowingly put themselves in grave danger in order to rescue someone from dying. One out of every five of those Carnegie medals was awarded posthumously because the honoree had died while trying to help.⁴ Most heroes, of course, don't get a medal at all.

Humans also help strangers in a variety of less heroic ways. In the month after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, 40,000 New Yorkers lined up to donate blood.⁵ Each month, nearly 4 billion adults around the world help a stranger in need, 2.3 billion donate money to a charitable organization, and more than 1.6 billion perform volunteer work.⁶ Americans alone commit \$600 billion worth of cash and volunteer labor annually to organizations that promote health, education, and human welfare.⁷ Two-thirds of British adults engage in a charitable activity at least once per month.⁸

Humans' generous spirit is also revealed by the activities of their governments on behalf of their most vulnerable citizens. On average, the rich nations of the developed world commit 21 percent of their gross domestic incomes (GDIs) to domestic social spending, which includes money for retirement pensions, health insurance, unemployment insurance, family benefits, disability benefits, food subsidies, and housing support, plus an additional 5 percent of their GDIs to education.⁹ You might not think of domestic social spending as "generosity toward strangers": after all, we don't pay our taxes gladly. All the same, until 150 years ago, the notion that the state was responsible for meeting such a broad array of human needs didn't exist anywhere. Then it existed everywhere.

And let's not forget the \$150 billion worth of official development assistance and humanitarian aid that the world's governments and nongovernmental agencies share with the world's neediest countries each year. Sure, these contributions amount to just a fraction of a percent of most donor nations' GDIs. Even so, \$100 billion here, \$100 billion there, and pretty soon you're talking about real money.¹⁰

Part of what makes modern generosity toward strangers so remarkable is the seemingly long odds against it. By most scientific accounts, the humans from whom we are descended were fanatically xenophobic, ready to greet needy strangers not with clean water, a hot meal, or a place to lay their heads for the night, but with spears and arrows instead. Just a few days before I sat down to draft these words, in fact, a Christian missionary from the United States was pinioned with arrows by members of a still-uncontacted tribe of hunter-gatherers on Sentinel Island in the Bay of Bengal. Later, the Sentinelese dragged the missionary's body out to the beach and buried it there. What makes our attitudes toward strangers so different from theirs? Modern humans' concern for the welfare of perfect strangers has no analog in the rest of the animal kingdom or even in most of our own history as a species. It's a true one-off. As such, it calls out for a special explanation.

Most modern historians have tried to help us understand the history of human generosity by serving it up one small bite at a time. One historian writes about philanthropy in ancient Athens, another about almsgiving in medieval Europe, another about the Elizabethan Poor Laws of sixteenth-century England, another about the nineteenth-century stirrings of the modern welfare state, and still another about twentieth-century efforts to eliminate poverty from the face of the Earth.

Other scholars, admittedly fewer in number today than a century ago, have sought to explain the rise of generosity as the result of historians' own version of Adam Smith's invisible hand: civilization. The Irish historian William Hartpole Lecky was one of the major exponents of the civilizationist theory of moral progress. In Lecky's view, humanity's regard for the welfare of strangers resulted from a centuries-long civilizing process in which superstition, xenophobia, and a stultifying satisfaction with the status quo were replaced by reason, cosmopolitanism, and a spirit of experimentation and self-improvement. A widening of the breadth

of human charity came along for the ride. As Lecky wrote in his two-volume *History of European Morals* in 1869, “history tells us that, as civilisation advances, the charity of men becomes at once warmer and more expansive, their habitual conduct both more gentle and more temperate, and their love of truth more sincere.”¹¹ Many other Victorian writers were also civilizationists (also known as progressives). Darwin himself was a civilizationist of sorts, as were many of the reformers responsible for the social innovations that we still rely on today to assist strangers.

Despite historians’ many invaluable contributions to our understanding of the kindness of strangers, the one-bite-at-a-time and the civilizationists alike have committed one important oversight: in their efforts to explain altruism and compassion using the standard tools of the historian, they have failed to grapple with the natural human faculties—our characteristic beliefs, desires, motivations, emotions, and cognitive powers—that were activated on a mass scale by the twists and turns of history to produce the penchant for helping strangers that we indulge today. To quote the cognitive scientist Pascal Boyer, minds make societies.¹² Thus, to fully explain how *Homo sapiens* came to greet needy strangers with compassion rather than cruelty, we have to understand why people believe what they believe, ponder what they ponder, and want what they want—and how they then figure out how to get it. We have to explain how a human mind that is built for a stone-aged world in which strangers were feared and killed can fashion a world for itself in which strangers are respected and assisted.

Complementing the historians’ approach to explaining human generosity is an approach that comes from the evolutionary sciences. For several decades, evolutionary biologists and evolutionary social scientists have been obsessed with humans’ generosity toward strangers, precisely because of its seeming implausibility. How could a penchant for wasting valuable resources on complete strangers evolve? After all, natural selection runs on reproductive fitness, and reproductive fitness runs on resources, so the more resources you keep for yourself, the better. Wouldn’t evolution punish people who got into the habit of giving stuff away to nobody in particular?

Among modern Darwinians, explanations for generosity toward strangers come in two forms. First, there are those who argue that strangers were a prominent feature of the ancestral human environment, and that

our ancestors in fact were able to obtain better Darwinian fitness by helping them. According to proponents of this “stranger-adaptation” hypothesis, we help strangers in the modern world because evolution designed us specifically to do so, circuitous though that design process must have been.

Second, there are those who argue that generosity toward strangers is merely a by-product of evolved instincts for taking care of our friends and relatives. When we help strangers in the modern world, these scholars argue, we are following ancient rules of thumb that worked well enough in a world in which meeting someone for the first time was a reasonably good indicator that you’d meet them again in the future (at which point they would have the opportunity to return your kindness). They argue further than in our modern world, those ancient rules of thumb cause us to mistakenly help strangers whom we will never meet again, which in the eyes of natural selection does amount to throwing your help away. The biologist Richard Dawkins refers to these modern-day errors of altruism as blessed mistakes:

An intelligent couple can read their Darwin and know that the ultimate reason for their [sexual] urges is procreation. They know that the woman cannot conceive because she is on the pill. Yet they find that their sexual desire is in no way diminished by that knowledge. Sexual desire is sexual desire and its force, in an individual’s psychology, is independent of the ultimate Darwinian pressure that drove it. It is a strong urge which exists independently of its ultimate rationale.

I am suggesting that the same is true of the urge to kindness—to altruism, to generosity, to empathy, to pity. In ancestral times, we had the opportunity to be altruistic only towards close kin and potential reciprocators. Nowadays that restriction is no longer there, but the rule of thumb persists. Why would it not? It is just like sexual desire. We can no more help ourselves feeling pity when we see a weeping unfortunate (who is unrelated and unable to reciprocate) than we can help ourselves feeling lust for a member of the opposite sex (who may be infertile or otherwise unable to reproduce). Both are misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes.¹³

Despite the differences between the stranger-adaptationists and the blessed-mistakers, members of both evolutionary camps end up

predicting that humans will display an abiding interest in the welfare of strangers—either because we were in a profound sense designed to care about strangers or because the ubiquity of strangers in our daily lives causes us to mistake them (unconsciously) for friends and loved ones. We can no more stop ourselves from wanting to help strangers in need, if the evolutionists are right, than we can stop our stomachs from growling when we're hungry.

These evolutionary explanations have their own blind spots, albeit different ones from those of the historian. The weakness of the stranger-adaptationists' approach is its inability to account for the reams of empirical evidence that our minds are actually quite poorly designed for motivating us to look after the welfare of strangers. The research indicates instead that our intuitive interest in the welfare of strangers—particularly when weighed against the strength of our intuitive interest in our own welfare, as well as the welfare of our friends and loved ones—is fickle, reluctant, and easily distracted. The evidence that evolution has tuned our minds for active concern for the welfare of strangers, as we will soon see, is thin indeed.

Additionally, the blessed-mistakers' argument that compassion for strangers is the result of the psychological systems that motivate us to care about family and friends must contend with an important principle of natural selection: those cognitive systems are likely to contain sophisticated fail-safes and identity-verification procedures that are designed to prevent us from helping strangers "by accident." Mistakes are costly—even the blessed ones—so natural selection designed us to avoid those mistakes whenever possible. And as we will see, we do try to avoid them whenever possible. Yes, we evolved to help our kin, but we also evolved to be able to distinguish kin from non-kin. And yes, we evolved to help people who would likely help us in return in the future, but as an appurtenance to that faculty, we also evolved to be able to distinguish people who are likely to reciprocate from those who aren't. Our evolved social instincts and sympathies are highly relevant to understanding the kindness of strangers, but stranger-adaptation and blessed-mistake theories are too simplistic.

Many evolutionary perspectives on generosity toward strangers also fail to take recent human history seriously enough, no doubt because evolutionists are primarily interested in natural selection, which needs eons to create complex functional design. As a result, they don't spend enough

time considering the causal pathways by which our generosity toward strangers has effloresced over the past ten thousand years.

Finally, evolutionists also tend to overlook two important mental faculties. The first is our ability to follow our incentives. Like other animals, we can track the paths of action that will lead us to the things we care about—food, shelter, clothing, fame, a city free of disease and crime, a prosperous national economy, fidelity to our ethical convictions, a meaningful life. We can then construct courses of action that will lead us closer to those things we desire. Second, and relatedly, modern evolutionists often overlook our capacity for reason. Humans evolved both to produce reasons—that is, to offer justifications for their beliefs and convictions—and to process reasons—that is, to evaluate the justifications that others offer for their beliefs and convictions. For too long, evolutionists have been allergic to psychological explanations for behavior that rely on seemingly general-purpose cognitive abilities such as “tracking incentives” and “reasoning.” However, as we will see, these faculties are indispensable for a complete account of our concern for strangers today.¹⁴ You just can’t explain it without them.

Fittingly enough, it was Darwin himself who fashioned our social instincts and our intellective powers into a scientific explanation for the vast expansion of human concern over the past ten millennia. “Any animal whatsoever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included,” Darwin wrote,

would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man. For, *firstly*, the social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy for them, and to perform various services for them. . . . But these feelings are by no means extended to all the individuals of the same species, only to those of the same association.¹⁵

Darwin surmised that the “well-marked social instincts” that motivate our concern for kith, kin, and compatriots, in spite of their parochiality, were recruited into service only very recently in human history to promote our regard for the welfare of all of humanity. And it was our capacity for reasoning, he averred, that did the recruiting:

As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to men of all nations and races.¹⁶

Later in the same chapter from his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*, Darwin drove his argument home again, almost apologetically, as if he were worried that he had begun to beat a dead horse:

The moral sense perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals; but I need say nothing on this head, as I have so lately endeavoured to shew that the social instincts—the prime example of man’s moral constitution—with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, “As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise”; and this lies at the foundation of morality.¹⁷

The argument I tender in this book is similar to Darwin’s own, and it is a straightforward one. I argue that the kindness of strangers is built upon a surprisingly small number—four, in fact—of our evolved human instincts. These include two of the instincts that Darwin called our “social instincts”—our instinct for helping others in hopes of receiving help in return, and our instinct for helping others in pursuit of glory—as well as the instincts Darwin called our “active intellectual powers,” especially our ability to track incentives and our capacity for reason.

I argue further that the kindness of strangers emerged over the past ten millennia through seven different confrontations with mass suffering, and the solutions that our social instincts and our active intellectual powers commended as solutions to those confrontations. To be sure, those seven historical encounters with want and woe engaged our basic social instincts—we helped in search of return favors and in search of glory—but they also engaged our ability to figure out what is important to us and our ability to reason our way to plans for how to obtain what is important to us. In short, our ancestors’ encounters with mass suffering created threats and opportunities to which they applied their powers of reasoning

to figure out how best to respond. And those responses turned out to be compassionate ones.

Although our social instincts and our capacity for reason furnished us with the *desire* to care about strangers, I argue that it was progress in three human endeavors—technology, science, and trade—that furnished us with the *ability* to care. We have Carnegie Heroes, Holocaust Rescuers, and anonymous kidney donors; we devote effort and resources to looking after the poor in our own countries; and we reach across seas, across borders, and even across generations to ease strangers' burdens not only because we want to, but also because we can.

In the upcoming chapter, I begin to lay out this argument by introducing the psychological obstacles that prevent us from taking an intuitive interest in the welfare of strangers. Without conscious, deliberative effort, the research from social and cognitive psychology shows, the human mind is breathtakingly insensate to the welfare of strangers. If natural selection really did design our minds to motivate us to care about strangers, as the stranger-adaptationists assert, then it must have been some pretty shoddy design work.

In Chapters 3 through 6, I will introduce you to those “social instincts and sympathies” that Darwin surmised to be the raw materials out of which our compassion for the distant stranger was fashioned. In the modern language of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, these instincts and sympathies are the products of evolved cognitive systems—little computational devices that exist in our brains as networks of neurons and synapses—that natural selection fashioned in order to motivate us to care about our friends, our relatives, and our compatriots. I begin in Chapter 3 with a cook's tour of natural selection. In Chapters 4 through 6, I explore what those Darwinian social instincts and sympathies can offer to help us explain the kindness of strangers. As these chapters will show, and contrary to what Darwin seems to have surmised, it's only a subset of our “social instincts and sympathies” that actually makes a difference.

From Chapters 7 through 13, each chapter is devoted to one of the seven confrontations with mass suffering that compelled our ancestors to think about the needs of strangers and how they should respond to them. Through this ten-thousand-year history of human compassion, I will show you how our social instincts and sympathies, along with our

capacity for reason, interacted to produce the innovations and institutions that we still turn to today.

In Chapter 14, the book's final chapter, I'll weave the natural history and the human history back together, describing the instincts, the reasons, and the progress in technology, science, and trade that have conspired over the past ten millennia to create humanity's compassion for humankind.

CHAPTER 2

ADAM SMITH'S LITTLE FINGER

Are humans hardwired to care about strangers? Glancing over my bookshelves, titles such as *Born to Be Good*, *The Compassionate Instinct*, and *The Altruistic Brain* remind me that many of my scientific colleagues answer this questions with a resounding yes. Each of these books, in its own unique way, teaches that the animal designated *Homo sapiens* has evolved for compassion. Caring about strangers is just part of who we are. If it doesn't come effortlessly, all it takes is some patience and some practice. Attend a workshop. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, so you can see the face of destitution. Read some fiction, and you can learn how to empathize. Meditate. Compassion is inside of you. You just need to coax it out.

These days, many social scientists are positively exuberant about our innate potential for generosity toward strangers. Their optimistic outlook on the kindness of strangers reminds me of a story I've heard on a few occasions. Perhaps you know it as well.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, from the Christian New Testament, is a story Jesus tells after being confronted by one of the local religious scholars who is trying to get the better of him. The scholar challenges Jesus to explain what the biblical commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" actually means. Jesus replies with a story:

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”¹

The parable of the Good Samaritan is nothing if not optimistic about the human potential for compassion. “Open your mind. Drop your prejudices. Reach out. You can do this.”

But there is a competing parable bouncing around out there, of more recent vintage. You’ve probably heard this one as well. It comes our way from two *New York Times* reporters who wrote about the sexual assault and murder in 1964 of a young woman named Catherine “Kitty” Genovese. The Genovese case became a national sensation not because of Genovese’s death, exactly, or even because of the viciousness of the attack, but because of the supposed apathy of the witnesses from a nearby apartment building, who knew something was amiss down at street level, yet did nothing to help her. Two weeks after the murder, Martin Gansberg wrote a *Times* piece about the people who saw the murder:

For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens. Twice, the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out and stabbed her again. Not one

person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead.²

Later that year, a second *Times* reporter named Abe Rosenthal wrote *Thirty-Eight Witnesses*, a book in which he decried the witnesses' apathy and lamented what it seemed to reveal about human nature:

She died in the early hours of March 13, 1964, outside the small apartment house in Queens where she lived as neighbors heard her scream her last half hour away and did nothing, nothing at all, to give her succor or even cry alarm. . . . A great many hard things have been said about these thirty-eight, and I am sure they are bewildered, and I know they are resentful. But it is important to say this—that what they did happens every night, in every city. The terror of the story of Catherine Genovese is simply that by happenstance all thirty-eight did that night what each alone might have done any night without the city having known, or cared.³

No Good Samaritans showed up to help. At least, that's how the parable of the thirty-eight witnesses goes. In fact, a few of the thirty-eight did try to help. Enough people called down from their windows to scare the assailant away following his first attack. Several people called the police. One neighbor even rushed down to try to help Genovese as she lay dying. The thirty-eight witnesses hadn't been as apathetic as Gansberg and Rosenthal made them out to be. Even so, the Genovese story has been immortalized in books and films as a watchword for human indifference. The parable of Catherine "Kitty" Genovese, if not the actual facts of the case, features in virtually every social psychology textbook of the past half-century.⁴

The parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the thirty-eight witnesses could not be more different from each other in what they say about human compassion, but they do have one feature in common: both remind us that there are strangers out there who could use our help. But are we Good Samaritans, or are we unresponsive bystanders? Once we have stripped away any illusions we might be harboring about the basic human potential for kindness, what will we find?

THE CYNICAL MR. SMITH

Ambrose Bierce, the author of the satirical *Devil's Dictionary* in 1906, defined a cynic as “a blackguard [dishonorable man] whose faulty vision sees things as they are and not as they ought to be.” Bierce’s cynic dispenses with comforting, idealistic fictions in order to see reality for what it actually is. If that’s a cynic, then few philosophers have been as cynical about humans’ intuitive regard for perfect strangers as the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith.

If you’re like most people, you are familiar with Adam Smith because of his best-known book, *The Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776. In his own time, however, Smith was at least as famous for a 1759 book, called *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that was dedicated to exploring the psychological foundations of our moral judgments. Much of Smith’s impact on the field of psychology today came from the attention he paid to sympathy as the emotion that activates our concern for others’ well-being. Without sympathy, Smith thought, humans’ natural regard for others—particularly absolute strangers—was ludicrously outmatched by self-love:

To the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance, excites a much more passionate joy or sorrow, a much more ardent desire or aversion, than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion. His interests, as long as they are surveyed from this station, can never be put into the balance with our own, can never restrain us from doing, whatever may tend to promote our own, how ruinous soever to him.⁵

For his skeptical readers who wanted to hang onto their un-Bierceian illusions about humans’ innate concern for the welfare of strangers, Smith offered a thought experiment:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connexion with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving

intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.⁶

Was Smith right to be such a cynic about selflessness? Would we really be more concerned about the integrity of our fifth digits than by news of one hundred million crushed and swallowed-up strangers? To answer such questions head-on, we don't need to content ourselves with waffling, bet-hedging, difference-splitting, parables, or even the psychological insights of a wig-wearing Scotsman from the eighteenth century. Instead, we can evaluate Smith's cynicism in the light of fifty years of scientific research. On the basis of this evidence, I'll argue that Smith got it largely right: each of us is Smith's man or woman of humanity. Our "humanity" (by which he meant something like education and refinement) makes us good at philosophizing about the plights of strangers, expressing our concern, and contemplating the fragility of life, but whatever those deep thoughts and solemn pronouncements are actually about, they cannot be counted on to motivate effective action on others' behalf. The mind, it seems, just doesn't work that way. Better news awaits in later chapters, but let's first try to see human nature through the faulty vision that sees things as they really are.

THE LIMITS OF ATTENTION

Many people have a story like this one, I suspect: A few years ago, I was having dinner with my family at an outdoor restaurant. After we finished eating, my wife took our kids to get some candy at a store down the street. I chatted with my father-in-law while we finished our drinks. Fifteen minutes later, my wife returned with a pressing question:

“Did the lady get her bag back?”

“Did what lady get her bag back?”

“The lady!”

“What lady?”

“That lady! The one over there who just got robbed?!”

“We didn’t see it.”

“What do you mean you didn’t see it?”

My incredulous wife pointed in the direction of the security guard, not twenty feet from where we sat, who was taking a report from a woman whose purse had evidently been snatched from her shoulder as we were sitting nearby. We had been oblivious to the entire event, including the woman’s repeated calls for help, the mall cop on his scooter, and the several bystanders who ran off to catch the culprit.

We missed it all. My father-in-law and I weren’t trying to tune out the woman’s plight. It’s just that our attentional resources were too tied up in talk about craft beers to tune her *in*.

Are you paying attention? It’s a wonder if you are because the number of other things you could be paying attention to at this very moment is staggering. The music in the background, the rattling motorcycle outside, every single feature of every single object in your field of view, your tennis elbow, the nail pops in the drywall, the blood pressure in your ears, the aftertaste of coffee, your caffeinated hand tremors, the whispered gossip, the whirring hard drive, your dysfunctional self-talk, the weight of the eyeglasses on the bridge of your nose—is somebody making popcorn? There’s simply too much going on out there for our minds to process even a fraction of it. As a result, we unconsciously make hard choices about where to focus our attention. Attention is a spotlight that illuminates a single feature of the world around us to the neglect of all the others.

We can also shine that attentional spotlight inward onto our own mental processes. When we are trying to accomplish a goal, for instance,

we focus the spotlight on the goal itself and the tasks we must perform in the service of fulfilling it. As we do so, however, we reduce the reservoir of attention that is available for observing other potentially interesting features of the world. The result is a phenomenon that scientists call inattentive blindness. When people narrow their attention to a single task or goal, they lose the ability to notice even highly unusual features of the environment, including purse-snatchings, clowns on unicycles, dollar bills literally hanging from the trees, and chest-pounding gorillas that walk through the middle of basketball games.⁷

In one revealing demonstration of inattentive blindness, the psychologist Christopher Chabris and his colleagues asked twenty people to take a nighttime run behind another jogger. During the brief run, they were supposed to count the number of times the lead jogger touched his head. Unbeknownst to the participants, the researchers had staged an assault. Just off to the side of the trail, two men faked an attack against another man as the joggers went by. At the end of the experiment, only seven of the twenty participants reported having noticed the incident. For the others, focusing on the lead jogger's head-touches created an inattentive blindness for a stranger in danger.

To make sure it wasn't the nighttime conditions that prevented people from noticing the attack, the researchers repeated the experiment in the daytime. They also varied the difficulty of the head-touch-counting task. One-third of the participants were told to follow along behind the jogger as before, keeping track of the number of times he touched his head. Only 56 percent of people in this condition reported noticing the assault. Another set of participants was told to follow along behind the jogger, but they were not given any further instructions: 72 percent of those participants reported noticing the assault. And in a third condition designed to make inattentive blindness even worse, participants were told to keep two counts: one of the number of times the jogger touched his head with his right hand, and another of the number of times he touched his head with his left hand. Among these participants, only 42 percent noticed the assault. Other researchers have shown that playing with your cell phone causes the same sort of inattentive blindness to others' needs. Our attention is a limited resource: there's just not enough to go around.⁸

It would be a poor design for a human mind if there was not some way for us to monitor the world for important information—even when